

The Dream Imagery of John Donne's Poetry

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Dreams precede reality: ideas exist before their actualization and implementation. The idea that dreams precede reality is certain since dreaming is the first step in the voyage into the subconscious realm of ideas and the creative expression, and resulting recombination, of thought. The poet must initiate the creative process by dreaming and formulating, then articulating, his ideas and poetry is the midwife between the subconscious and expressed ideas. Just as the architect must first have a concept before his building is realized, the painter must have a thought or image in mind to record, and the scientist must have an idea for an hypothesis to develop into theory and then into practice, so too does the poet have a poetic vision and dreaming initiates the creative mechanism. To analyze the dreaming process may help understand the process but may actually stifle the production of ideas whose manifestations are usually the resolution or recognition of a problem. John Donne employs in his poems the use of dream imagery to express his metaphysical and romantic thought and takes the reader on a journey through the universal and collective subconscious.

In *The Dream*, Mr. Donne refers to living a happy dream, that is, that life is a dream state (are we actually in a dream dreaming that we are awake?) unlike Shakespeare's Hamlet who, in his "To be or not to be" soliloquy he thinks of death as a sleep and a possible dream state: "what dreams may come when we have shuffled off this mortal coil?" (*Hamlet*; Act III, Scene I). In *The Dream* Donne says:

Dear love, for nothing less than thee
would I have broke this happy dream.

He mentions reason, or rational thought, as too strong for, or conquering "phantasy" or imagination. He mentions to his addressee or about and to whom the poem is written (his wife? lover? friend? children? the reader of the poem?) that they wisely awakened him from his dream (brought him "down to earth") and in the process his "dream thou brok'st not, but continued'st it." Therefore, the spiritual quest, the quest and progress of the soul continues. Rather than interrupting his blissful dream they instead joined and became part of his continuing dream making us wonder if our dreams are actually reality and what we think are our actual lives are actually dreams. The subject, or addressee, of the poem he claims is truth:

Thou art so truth, that thoughts of thee suffice
To make dreams truths and fables histories.

Or, in other words, , the subject of the poem he says is truth and that his dreams are realized and become true by thinking about whom the poem is written: fiction becomes fact.

The quest for truth and its conceptual representation , whether visual or verbal is the goal of all artists. Ironically, the artist creates falsities or fictions that reveal elements of the truth (p. 98, *New Essays on Donne*): "Art is a lie that reveals the truth", as Picasso paraphrased Nietzsche. Mystery is the predominant element of good poetry and universality is the common factor of great poetry like surprise, timing, and incongruity are factors of humor. Though, like analyzing humor too much makes something not funny, according to Donne too "much truth defeats all poetry," (p. 94, *New Essays on Donne*). In other words, the mystery is gone if all is explained. If too much is revealed in poetry, the magic dissolves. Poetry, like dreams and life, should not be completely understood: their essence being the mystery of life itself. Explicit explanation falls in the realm of non-fiction, prose, and science. Poetry should contain the element of the unknown like those voyages into the subconscious: dreams.

In the same poem he makes an allusion to the physical world by saying:

Enter these arms, for since thou thought'st it best
Not to dream all my dream, let's do the rest.

These lines seem to be something of a contradiction to his previous statement about the continuance of his dream but, then again, life and its reflection, art are full of contradictions so to whom he is speaking chose not to dream all of his particular vision. He mentions the intensity of his adored one as having eyes as intense as lightening and that awakened him from his spiritual slumber or happy dream. His love or loved one he thought was an angel (a lover of truth) at first sight. When he realized the subject of the poem could look into his heart "beyond an angel's art" he thought it obscene to think about anything but his love. He mentions how doubt enters into and corrodes relationships as well as fear, shame and honor. He observes how people snuff out each other's flames, using the metaphor of life being a brief candle or taper, which makes necessary the rekindling of the dream of hope.

In another poem, his unrhymed *Elegy X. The Dream*, Donne again employs the image of feminine beauty and love to create his metaphysical approach to searching for truth in satisfying relationships and begins with the line:

Image of her (whom I love, more than she)

which could assume the double meaning of the feminine object of desire not loving herself as much as he loves her or that he loves the *image* of her more than she. The metaphor of currency is used:

As Kings do coins to which their stamps impart

The value) go, and take my heart from hence,

and is appropriate since love is a current or flow of ideas and relationships between people. Honors or abilities oppress lesser spirits and the senses dull strong objects. When one is gone (through death, loss of faculty, or physical removal) then reason or rational thought leaves also and fantasy or imagination reigns and becomes all consuming, creating all forms of joy.

So if I dream I have you,

For all our joys are but fantastical.

And so I 'scape the pain, for pain is true;

and sleep, which locks up sense, doth lock out all.

To paraphrase, to escape pain is to escape truth, for pain is certain and an inevitable aspect of reality and sleep which may refer to Hamlet's sleep of death, causes us to be senseless and locks out all, alluding to physical or spiritual death.

The last section of the poem contains images of resolution and conclusion:

After such a fruition I shall wake

And, but the waking, nothing shall repent; or after a culmination of dreaming the author will come to his senses and will regret nothing except the logical, rational awakening.

And shall to love more thankful sonnets make

Than if more honor, tears, and pains were spent

or praise romantic love in poetry rather than mentioning honor, fear, and shame.

But dearest heart, and dearer image, stay;

Mr. Donne is pleading for his love to stay, and the image of that love, which is even sweeter, to also stay.

Alas, true joys at best are dream enough
or the joys of life are as enjoyable as pleasant dreams:

Though you stay here you pass too fast away,
For even at first life's taper is a snuff.

In other words, even if you stay on earth, your life, even if it is a long life, is but a brief, fleeting moment compared to geologic time:

Filled with her love, may I be rather grown
Mad with much heart than idiot with none.

Filled with a passionate love for his subject the speaker, Mr. Donne, would rather be insanely romantic with feeling and emotion than to be an unfeeling machine, a thought calling to mind the countering opposite wish of the late contemporary artist Andy Warhol, whose antiromantic desire was to become a machine without emotion, either painful or pleasant.

Dream images abound in literature from premonitions, forewarning, and the supernatural in Shakespeare's plays *Macbeth*, *Julius Caesar*, *A Midsummer's Night Dream*, and *The Tempest*:

We are such stuff as dreams are made on,
and our little life is rounded with a sleep.
(*The Tempest*; Act IV, sc 1, line 156.)

Existentialist writers write about reality as an absurd not understandable dream play. Children's stories, songs, fairy tales, and fables all employ the images of the dream world, that area between consciousness and unconsciousness where unknown stirrings of the logical and rational thinking processes occur and take their visual and verbal form in surrealism and metaphysical poetry. Dreams have been analyzed in psychological writings including Sigmund Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams* for their psychoanalytic content and their importance in the subconscious resolution of

predominantly interpersonal relationships and the acting out and ventilation of daily conflict and social frustration. The content of dreams can contain symbols of culturally relative significance sometimes known only to the dreamer and sometimes not even to him. Many artists, when asked to comment on their work do not themselves fully understand the meaning of the images they have created. This unknown quality or mystery is part of what gives art its appeal and intrigue and this can be the joy as well as the problem of interpreting any work of art, including the poetry of John Donne. If Mr. Donne were around today for someone to ask him the meaning of his poems he might say that he just liked the musical sound of the words, or that your guess was as good as his, or that he didn't know, or that he refused to limit the universality of his poetry by placing a narrow meaning on their content and saying that the meaning of the poems are contained only within the poem (the object) and the interpretation of the reader (the subject). His concise wording, like Emily Dickinson's, can be interpreted on so many levels that his poetry can have very different meanings to various readers. As his poetry progressed from the sensual to the sublime, his romantic, intellectual mind concerned the concept of love with its multitude of meaning.

The dream content is more disguised in some of his other poems among them *The Canonization* where love is taken to religious heights and the lovers' dream is to be totally consumed by each other in complete isolation from society. From the carnal, sensual love of eros to higher, nobler love of God (Truth?), all are forms or variations of the same emotion of devotion and dependency, relationships of mutual understanding and interdependence. As the spirit or soul progresses through childhood, adult life, and old age and eventually death, the soul transforms in interests from more self-consuming concerns to more universal, societal interests. John Donne in his poetry captures the essence of this progression from naivete to maturity, from awareness to consciousness, and from innocence to experience.

Bringing the subconscious to consciousness through the dream mechanism is one of the methods Donne uses to reveal the human spirit and his concern with the quest for truth and beauty. While using the vague, highly interpretable use of dream images and its metaphysical ramifications and implications, Donne expands the universal human experience through collective consciousness and

expresses those innermost almost inexpressible feelings that everyone through an evolving, growing life experiences to some extent. In *The Good Morrow* Donne captures the fleeting, ephemeral nature of reality, where dreams are equated with reality, in one of the most succinctly romantic lines ever written perhaps, an image of unrequited love or unrealized desire:

If ever any beauty I did see
Which I desired and got;
'Twas but a dream of thee.

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